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ABSTRACT

The problem of improving the quality of incoming college students and practicing fairness in admissions was studied at Boston College. The study sample was over 2000 accepted applicants who completed an admissions questionnaire. A systematic admissions procedure is described that provides an index of applicant "quality," and the rating process is explored using a path model to measure the contributions of background and achieved characteristics of applicants to their rating. The way questions of bias may be raised and pursued is considered, and applicants are profiled to show how the effects of policy adjustments may be monitored. Six segments were defined by crossing three levels of quality (top, high, or medium) with two values of enrollment status (matriculation or nonmatriculation). Factor analysis was used to model the differing images of Boston College across the six segments. Discriminant analysis was applied to represent two dimensions, "decision" and "quality" in ratings of both Boston College and of the named competitor. Some specifics of a differentiated policy are considered as examples, and implications of this integrated approach are discussed. (Author/SW)

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Toward Improving the Quality of Incoming Students While Maintaining Fairness in Admissions

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Mary Corcoran
University of Minnesota
(Editor, AIR Forum Publications)

Abstract:

Toward Improving the Quality of Incoming

Students While Maintaining Fairness in Admissions

Given the projected decline in the traditional, college-going markets and a likely heightened competition for students, it will be a challenge to provide management information which can improve the quality of incoming students and at the same time assure fairness. An approach which integrates a number of methods into an ongoing research program is suggested and illustrative findings are presented. First, a systematic Admissions procedure is described which provides the index of applicant "quality." Then, the rating process itself is explored using a Path Model to measure the contributions of background and achieved characteristics of applicants to their rating. How questions of bias may be raised and pursued is discussed. Applicants are profiled in segments to show how the effects of policy adjustments may be monitored. In the second section, quality-by-enrollment status segments are studied. Using factor analysis models, an analysis of image variance is applied. Next, a discriminant analysis served to isolate those aspects of the University which, if adjusted, might most influence higher quality applicants to enroll. Some specifics of a differentiated policy are given in examples. Implications of this integrated approach are discussed.

Toward Improving the Quality of Incoming Students While Maintaining Fairness in Admissions

Introduction: Admissions people often have reason to ponder about why many of the most pressing problems of the university seem to be placed on their shoulders. Ongoing controversies over discrimination and questions about student competency reach to the core of our educational system. These concerns have raised everyone's awareness of the intricacies and the importance of Admissions policy. Now, with a projected decline in the number of college going 17-18 year olds over the next 15 years, another serious problem focuses attention on Admissions. For many in higher education, the fear is not just that the overall pool will be smaller, but that institutions will have to lower their Admissions criteria and that the educational experience at many institutions will be devalued. It will be a challenge during this period of retrenchment, for higher education to maintain professional standards of fairness and quality.

Given the importance of the problem, research on how Admissions may concentrate specifically on improving the "quality" of incoming students while maintaining fairness is relatively rare. Most seem to assume that by increasing institutional "attractiveness," and thereby enlarging an applicant pool, Admissions can be placed in a position to increase absolute yields among higher quality students. While this may be effective in varying degrees, there is no guarantee that this approach is either the most efficient for the institution or the most fair for applicants.

A few researchers have used standard measures of academic quality such as SAT scores to do segmentation analyses on applicant markets (see Jewett, 1971 and Gilmour, Spiro and Dolich, 1978). However, these approaches are

not as helpful as they might be because Admissions rating procedures are not linked to operational efforts to improve the quality of incoming students. And because there is no direct link, one cannot easily evaluate whether or not objective standards of fairness are being maintained. It would appear to be worthwhile to employ an institutionally defined measure of applicant quality to segment a market and to monitor exactly, the effects of policy adjustments.

Operationalizing a Definition of Applicant Quality: It is the Admissions function to attract and enroll those students who maximize the overall educational experience of everyone at an institution. "Quality" then is a relative concept which should be consonant both with the goals of the institution and with the needs of students.

For Admissions procedures to be an objective implementation of the mission of an institution and to insure fairness of treatment to applicants, it is desirable to systematize, to an extent, the rating process. A summary, numerical index of "quality" is very useful because it opens the whole operation for self-study. If the resultant index can be shown to be a valid representation of the different characteristics and needs of applicants, it becomes feasible through segmentation analysis to improve one's treatment of various applicant subgroups.

At Boston College all decisions on applicants hinge on the Admissions rating procedure. The Admissions rating is a number assigned by a staff member responsible for evaluating an applicant. The ratings range on a scale from 1 to 10 (with 1 being the highest). Staff members, given 100 applications, are to distribute ratings to average over a cycle as follows:

One "1," four "2's," ten "3's," ten "4's," ten "5's," fifteen "6's," fifteen "7's," fifteen "8's," ten "9's," and ten "10's."

Within this major constraint, which eliminates variability in rater's tendencies to weight the high, middle or low end of the scale, primary emphasis is placed on percentile rank in high school. The emphasis on high school performance was established and continues as this criterion is found to be the best single predictor of academic performance and "success" at Boston College.[1] SAT scores, recommendations, examples of writing, etc. are considered at the next level. Thus the staff member may adjust the preliminary rating of an applicant if the secondary criteria seem to warrant it. Note however, that within the distributional constraint, when one applicant is moved up, another must be moved down. Such control over consistency is necessary because of the very real importance the Admissions rating has for whether an individual is admitted, granted housing, offered financial aid, etc.

Optimally, the decisions which allocate scarce resources are made to be congruent with the aims of Boston College to bring in the "best" class. Yet the rating process is not mechanical. Each rating represents a personal judgment at the end of an involved process. Figure 1 represents schematically this complexity.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Because the rating of an applicant is not totally quantifiable, a "black box" is used in the figure to signify the thought process which mediates

between the characteristics of institution and applicant and the Admissions rating. The point is, an Admissions rating is not and should not be a summary of an applicant's characteristics. It should be a personal judgment about how each applicant may improve the educational environment of Boston College's academic community. Although each rating is in the end subjective, the comparative significance of applicant characteristics may be objectively measured for the full distribution of Admissions ratings.

Methodology

Data Sources: The sample is made up of over 2000 applicants accepted to enroll in Fall of 1979 who returned an Admissions Questionnaire mailed out the preceeding summer. Information from the Questionnaire was merged with data from applicant files.

Goals: The analyses for this study are divided into two separate yet related sections. The purpose of the first section is to illustrate how the Admissions rating process itself may be described, how questions of bias may be explored and how effectiveness may be measured after each Admissions cycle. The second section is designed to show how segmentation analysis may be used to direct policy towards the aim of attracting those students deemed of higher quality.

Analytical techniques: In section one, "Admissions rating" is treated as an interval level dependent variable. A path model is estimated to measure the contributions of selected background characteristics and achievement indicators to an applicant's final rating. Then a profile of accepted applicants is constructed which illustrates how tabular data may be helpful

for assessing the effects of Admissions policy.

In section two, six segments are defined by crossing three levels of quality (top, high or medium) with two values of enrollment status (Boston College matriculation or non-matriculation).[2] Then factor analysis is used to model the differing "images" (i.e. overall perceptions) of Boston College across the six segments. Next, discriminant analysis is applied to represent two dimensions, "decision" and "quality" in ratings of both Boston College and of the named competitor.[3] Finally, the relative importance of identified "decision" attributes for each quality segment is measured by comparing coefficients from reestimated discriminant analysis models.

Results - Section One

A Path Analytic Explanation of Admissions Rating: With the diagram presented in Figure 2, it may be observed that the two achieved characteristics mediate or account directly for almost all of the explained variance in Admissions rating. In contrast, background characteristics, after controlling for the achievement indicators, contribute almost nothing (directly) to how applicants are rated. To be more specific, this diagram shows, because the direct path coefficients are statistically insignificant, that there is no evidence of rater bias based on either an applicant's race or expressed financial need (a proxy for parental wealth).

Insert Figure 2 about here.

There is a very slight measured advantage given to females, although

even this is not conclusive evidence of rater bias. It may be, for example, that females excel on other components not measured here but considered by raters. These might include the required essays, the interview, recommendations, high school activities, etc. Certainly though, the reason for this advantage should be pursued to settle the question.

Significant indirect effects of background characteristics through achieved characteristics are found; although this probably reveals more about past inequalities in American society than about the Admissions procedure at Boston College per se. It is of some interest that females are shown to do better on high school percentile (P = .15) than on SAT's (P = -.14). Without this balance, females might have had an even greater advantage over males. Non-whites on the other hand score lower than whites on both high school percentile (P = -.12) and on SAT's (P = -.30), although the disadvantage is less on the former. Similarly, those who applied for financial aid fared better with high school percentile rank, Boston College's primary selection criterion.

A segmentation profile: Quality segments are profiled using mean high school percentile and average SAT verbal and math scores for matriculants and non-matriculants separately. The most notable conclusion is that Admission rating successfully segments accepted applicants. The better the quality according to Admissions rating, the higher the average achievements of segments. The range and consistency of this pattern validates the usefulness of this segmentation for differentiating among accepted applicants at least with respect to these achieved characteristics.

Insert Table 1 about here.

A comparison of means between matriculants and non-matriculants within rating segments helps to identify the effects of college choice on the composition of the Class of 1983. On high school percentile, Boston College is fairly effective in enrolling the better high school performers within each quality segment. However, non-matriculants score higher than matriculants on both SAT verbal and math scores. This reflects the results of competition between Boston College and its prestigious competitors.[4] Many of these schools place more emphasis on SAT's when setting Admissions policy and are able to draw away high scorers. Yet the SAT differential may not indicate a true difference in "quality" if high school percentile is a better measure of academic competence and motivation, as has been found at Boston College.

In the last column of Table 1, the Admissions yield for each quality segment has been calculated. This is the "bottom-line" index of how well the more attractive applicants are being enrolled. Of course, these figures should be collected each year to evaluate changes in Admissions policy or in the college-going behaviors of accepted applicants more generally.

Results - Section Two

Image Analysis: A maximum likelihood factor analysis of 28 rated attributes of Boston College is performed separately for the six quality-by-enrollment status segments.[5] Rather than present the six tables which would be required to show the 7 or 8 dimensions constituting each image, only the important departures from the image held by top quality matriculants will be discussed here.[6] The image these applicants have of

Boston College serves as a proper focus because they represent the desired outcome, top quality enrolled students.

Insert Table 2 about here.

In Table 2, eight dimensions of image are identified. This factor model, when compared to the others, can suggest how top quality matriculants view Boston College differently. While there are a number of lesser patterns here, one "concern" seems to run through a number of dimensions. Consider the following observations about the image of top quality matriculants:

1. Teaching Reputation is given primacy over General Reputation (see Factor 2). Other segments do just the opposite.
2. Student/Faculty Ratio is prominent on a number of dimensions (Factors 5, 6 and 7).
3. The dimension described by Factor 7 is bipolar. Another kind of reputation (High School Counselor's Rating) is negatively related to Student/Faculty Ratio. Thus, in spite of a lower rating from counselors, Student/Faculty Ratio is rated higher.
4. In another bipolar relationship, top quality matriculants who rate the University's Student/Faculty Ratio and College Faculty high, tend to downplay Employment Opportunities after Graduation (see Factor 5).

Uniquely, these applicants seem to view the classroom experience at

Boston College to be of greater importance than other aspects of reputation or even future employment. The most effective way to meet this concern and to perhaps attract more of these students might be to increase top quality applicants' contact with teaching faculty. Increased participation by faculty in Admissions recruiting and in encouraging classroom visits are two ways such an effort might be accomplished.

A few additional observations about this image analysis may be summarized as follows:

1. Because top and high quality matriculants emphasize Variety of Courses over Specific Academic Programs, Admissions literature or special mailings might be designed to more carefully describe course offerings outside the applicant's intended major.
2. Contact with Admissions Personnel seems to be important enough for <u>both</u> top quality segments, matriculants and non-matriculants, to define a dimension of their images of Boston College. The other segments do not. This in itself shows the influence Admissions Personnel have at this level. Yet the impact of their influence is not consistent. Matriculants associate Contact with Admissions Personnel with Emphasis on Graduate Programs (Factor 8). Whereas, non-matriculants make the association with Attractiveness of Campus. The first indicates that a serious-minded, scholarly view was imparted. The second seems to show that Admissions Personnel impressed them more as tour guides (which they may have been).

Decision and Quality Dimensions: Table 3 displays two functions. The first, labeled "Decision," identifies the key attributes of Boston College and its competitors which quality segments appraise when making their college decision. Therefore, by improving applicant's ratings of these attributes of Boston College, their rates of enrollment may be increased most.

Insert Table 3 about here.

The second function, labeled "Quality," identifies the attributes which best discriminate among top, high and medium quality segments. The attributes with negative coefficients are related inversely to the quality of an applicant. For example, the higher the quality of an applicant, the lower Boston College's General Reputation is rated. Higher quality applicants are, after all, comparing Boston College to some very good colleges and universities.

A positive coefficient on the "Quality" function means that higher quality applicants rate these attributes higher. The fact that evaluations of Housing Opportunities (.79) and Financial Aid (.24) are related positively with quality is a direct result of Boston College's housing and aid policies. Top and high quality applicants are offered on-campus housing; most medium quality applicants are not. Similarly, substantial financial aid packages (up to need) are offered to top quality applicants; less attractive packages are offered to lower rated applicants.

It should be recognized that a number of the 28 attributes appear on neither function. There is little reason to vary one's treatment of quality segments with respect to these attributes.

To generally improve the quality of enrolled students, an institution should concentrate its policies to have the greatest effects on those attributes which appear on both the "Decision" and the "Quality" dimensions. In approximate order of importance, these attributes in this study are:

1. General Reputation
2. Financial Aid
3. Specific Academic Programs
4. Location of Campus
5. Contact with Admissions Personnel

"Decision" Across Quality Segments: It is possible to further refine one's treatment of each quality segment. By comparing the results of three separate discriminant analyses of enrollment status (matriculants vs. non-matriculants) for each quality segment, one may gauge the relative importance of the "Decision" attributes identified in Table 3. For example, among top quality applicants, Boston College's General Reputation is the most efficient predictor (d = .39) of who will matriculate (see Table 4). Moreover, a change in General Reputation does yield about the same increase among high quality applicants (d = .30) but is of little significance (d = .07) among medium quality applicants. Thus, the question of Boston College's General Reputation should be addressed in presentations designed to encourage top and high quality applicants to enroll, but would be a waste for medium quality students. In contrast, given the same change in applicant's perceptions of an attribute such as Financial Aid,

approximately the same effects on enrollment yields may be expected for each quality segment.

Insert Table 4 about here.

By examining the coefficients of attributes of competitors, the effects of other institutions' policies on common applicants may be measured. For example, admissions personnel at competitor schools would seem to be more effective at drawing away top and high quality students (the coefficients are -.19, -.22, and -.06 across the three quality segments). Also, financial aid policy at competitor schools is shown to be of considerable importance across all three segments, but has the greatest impact among top quality applicants (d = -.32).

Implications

Institutional researchers will be called upon increasingly over the coming decade to "do something" about the problems likely to arise with national enrollment declines. "One-shot" studies will not be sufficient to inform planners on how to adjust to times which will probably be characterized by uncertainty and rapidly changing relationships. To meet these new demands, researchers need to develop coordinated research efforts which integrate a number of methods in an ongoing effort to provide useful information which may both impact and evaluate decision-making. Such efforts are most likely to be successful if researchers:

1. Work closely with policy-makers to understand their needs and gain benefits from their insights.
2. Establish measurement methods which are built on working procedures.
3. Pursue research with pragmatic aims, preferably with quick as well as long-term payoffs.
4. Devise a regularized monitoring process which evaluates the results of past actions and which monitors the effects on other institutional or societal goals.

The present study tackles a complex Admissions dilemma. How does one go about attracting more high "quality" students without violating established ethical standards. A systematic approach has been described which can translate institutional goals into an Admissions rating procedure. Most importantly, this opens the whole Admissions process to self-study and may be related to the perceptions and college choice behaviors of applicants. This facilitates research which can take into account differences among applicants, in this case to get the higher quality students to enroll, and can improve treatment of individual needs. This has obvious advantages for the institution, yet can be justified, again through research, as broadly fair.

The patterns of relationships discovered here are not expected to be generalizable. Rather, the findings are meant to test the efficacy of the approach itself. Any college or university which has a segmented market may find the integration of these methods into the planning process helpful.

Footnotes

An earlier version of this paper was printed in the 1979 Proceedings of the North East Association for Institutional Research.

[1]This statement is based on 25 validity studies conducted on Boston College students over the last 15 years.

[2]"Top quality" corresponds to the top 5% of the applicant pool (Admissions ratings of "1" or "2"); high quality, the next 20% ("3's" and "4's") and medium quality, the next 40% ("5's," "6's," and "7's"). Because "8's," "9's" amd "10's" in the accepted applicant pool are not at all representative of these segments in the complete applicant pool, they were excluded.

[3]Consult Maguire and Lay, 1980 for the rationale behind building statistical models of image and decision in the study of college choice.

[4]See Lay and Maguire, 1980 for a more direct method of measuring the effects of competition.

[5]Rao's Canonical Factor Analysis with iterative estimation of communalities and oblique rotation (Delta = -1) of factors which account for greater than one eigen value is the specific technique used.

[6]Copies of these tables and more information on these factor models may be obtained by writing either author.

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Table 1

Achieved Characteristics of Accepted Applicants by Admissions Rating of Quality-Class of 1983[1]

Admissions Rating	High School Percentile		SAT Verbal		SAT Math		N		Yield
	m[2]	n[2]	m	n	m	n	m	n	
1	.8	1.7	638	653	656	671	19	29	40%
2	2.8	2.4	575	596	614	642	86	107	45%
3	5.6	5.8	548	580	578	605	272	200	58%
4	8.5	9.2	517	541	554	586	235	149	61%
5	13.4	13.4	514	533	565	580	230	112	67%
6	18.6	19.5	492	517	525	553	204	100	67%
7	26.0	24.6	467	473	492	512	94	38	71%
8	34.5	34.0	439	455	483	485	31	13	71%
9	43.0	33.7	423	487	489	513	16	3	84%
10	71.4	-	397	-	442	-	6	0	100%

[1] For accepted applicants who returned the 1979 Admissions Questionnaire.

[2] m=matriculants; n=non-matriculants.

Table 2

Top Quality[a] Matriculants' "Image" of Boston College -
A Factor Analysis of 28 Rated Attributes of the University

Factor 1	Factor 2
Variety of Courses .83	Teaching Reputation .85
Specific Academic Programs .69	General Reputation .62
Factor 3	**Factor 4**
Athletic Facilities .71	Social Activities .51
Athletic Programs .65	Male/Female Ratio .45
Religious Opportunities .47	
Employment Opportunities after Graduation .43	Financial Aid -.54
Factor 5	**Factor 6**
Student/Faculty Ratio .46	Size of School .52
College Faculty .42	Housing Opportunities .51
	Quality of Student Body .41
Employment Opportunities after Graduation -.48	Student/Faculty Ratio .40
Factor 7	**Factor 8**
High School Counselor's Rating .61	Contact with Admissions Personnel .62
	Emphasis on Graduate Programs .56
Student/Faculty Ratio -.40	

Note Results are from Rao's Canonical Factor Analysis with iterative estimation of communalities and with oblique rotation of factors (Delta = -1). Factors account for one eigen value or greater. Attributes which load (from the pattern matrix) /.4/ or greater are listed.

[a] These matriculants were rated in the top 5% of the entire applicant pool (Admissions rating = 1 or 2).

Table 3

A Discriminant Analysis of Six Quality-by-Enrollment Status Segments

	School Being Rated			
Function	Boston College	D[a]	Competitor[b]	D
"Decision"	Financial Aid	.26	Financial Aid	-.28
	General Reputation	.26	Specific Academic Programs	-.23
	Specific Academic Programs	.23	Social Activities	-.23
	Parents' Preference	.22	Distance from Home	-.22
	Size of School	.18	Size of School	-.21
	Social Activities	.16	Parents' Preference	-.16
	Location of Campus	.13	General Reputation	-.16
	Contact with Admissions Personnel	.11	Contact with Admissions Personnel	-.15
			Location of Campus	-.10
"Quality"	Housing Opportunities	.79	Attractiveness of Campus	.25
	Financial Aid	.24	General Reputation	.19
	Location of Campus	.19		
	Specific Academic Programs	.14		
	General Reputation	-.29	Location of Campus	-.34
	Contact with Admissions Personnel	-.13	Contact with Admissions Personnel	-.15

Note Results are from Wilks' Stepwise Discriminant Analysis.

[a]Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients

[b]Attributes of institutions which Boston College matriculants give as their alternate choice and which non-matriculants say they will attend.

Table 4

A Discriminant Analysis of Enrollment Status for Each Quality Segment, Separately[a]

School	Attributes	Applicant Quality: Top	High	Medium
Boston College				
	General Reputation	.39	.30	.07
	College Faculty	.28	.20	.26
	Financial Aid	.28	.23	.25
	Distance from Home	.25	-.01	.08
	Parents' Preference	.20	.28	.10
	Specific Academic Programs	.24	.27	.30
	Location of Campus	.10	.18	.16
	Social Activities	.12	.26	.18
	Size of School	.09	.18	.23
	Contact with Admissions Personnel	-.02	.09	.14
Competitor				
	General Reputation	-.34	-.17	-.10
	College Faculty	-.03	-.35	-.25
	Financial Aid	-.32	-.26	-.19
	Distance from Home	-.20	-.14	-.26
	Parents' Preference	-.24	-.12	-.21
	Specific Academic Programs	-.29	-.33	-.19
	Location of Campus	-.18	-.16	-.03
	Social Activities	-.29	-.19	-.39
	Size of School	-.14	-.22	-.25
	Contact with Admissions Personnel	-.19	-.22	-.06

Note. Three set discriminant analyses (direct method) were run for each quality segment separately. The canonical correlations are .80, .75, and .67 for each model, respectively.

[a]Reported are unstandardized discriminant function coefficients. The constants for each equation are .88, .28, and .17, respectively.

Figure Captions

Figure 1: A Model of the Rating Process

Figure 2: A Path Diagram of the Measured Contributions of Applicant Characteristics to the Admissions Rating of Quality.

Legend:

Race - Non-White = 1
White = 0

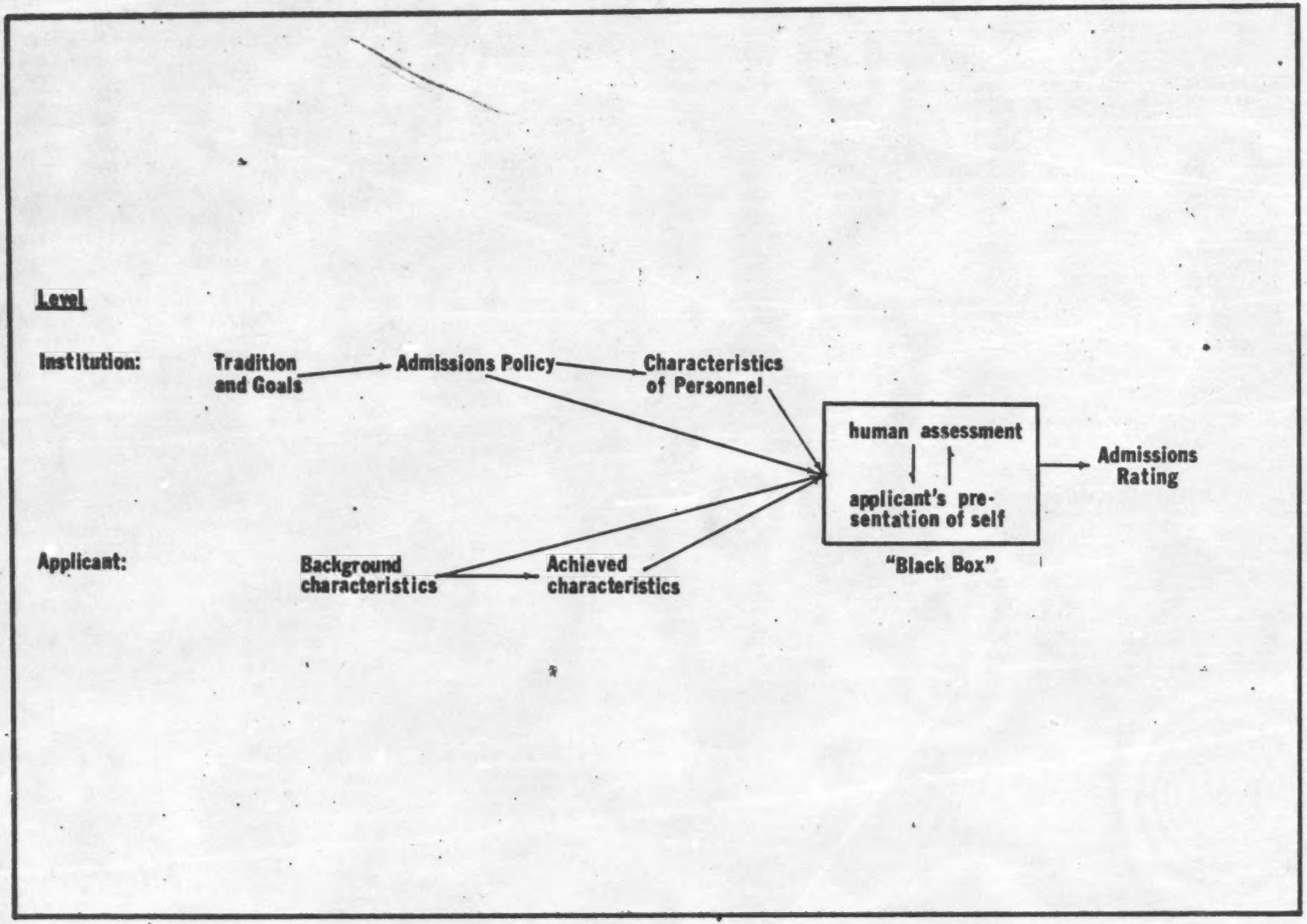
Sex - Female = 1
Male = 0

Need Aid - Applied for Aid = 1
Did not = 0

SAT's - 400 to 1600, 1600 is top.

High School Percentile - 1 to 100, reversed so that 100 is top.

Admissions Rating - 1 to 10, reversed so that 10 is top.


Level
Institution:
Tradition and Goals
Admissions Policy
Characteristics of Personnel
human assessment
applicant's pre-sentation of self
Admissions Rating
Applicant:
Background characteristics
Achieved characteristics
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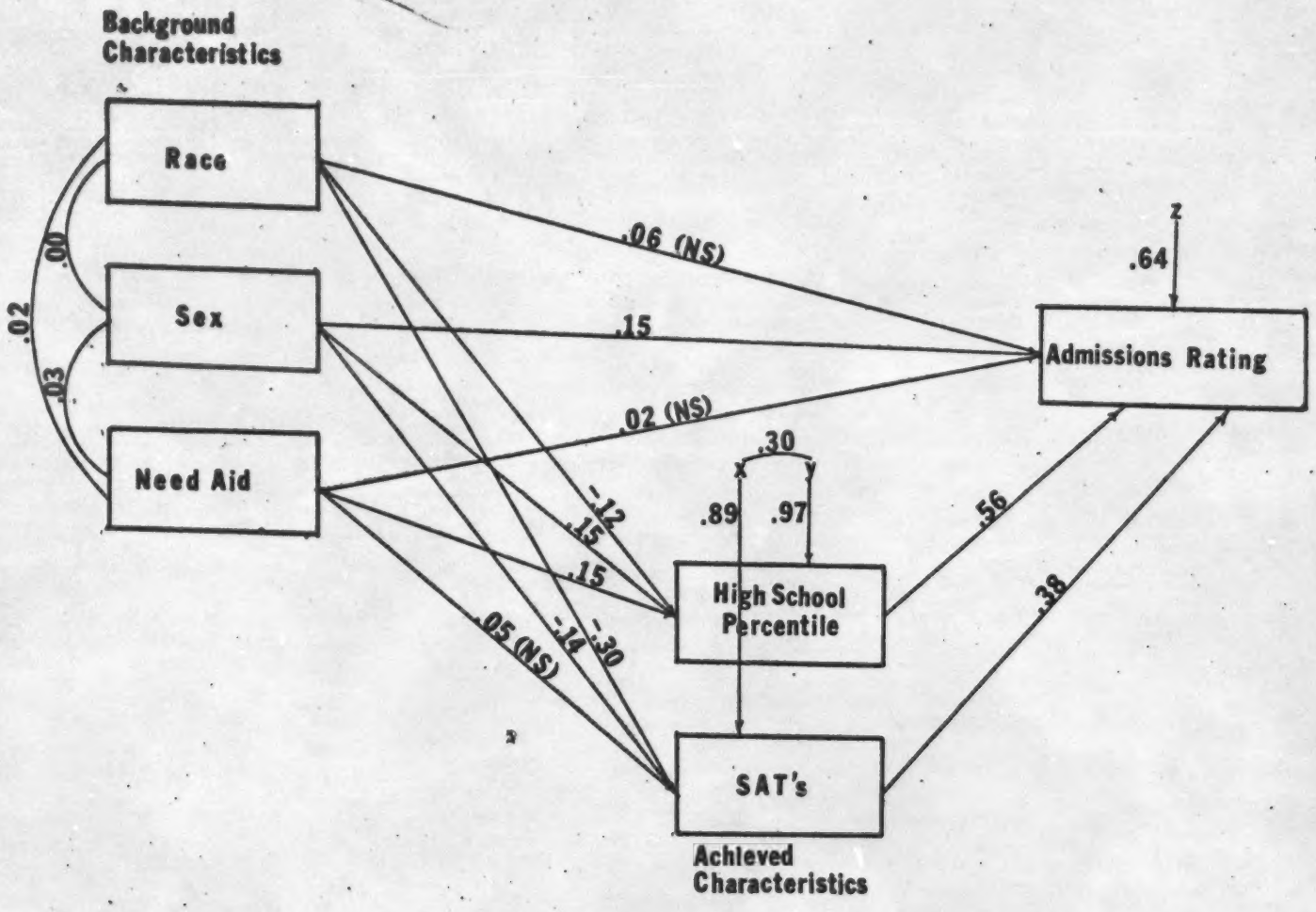
Background Characteristics
Race
Sex
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.02
.00
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.64
Admissions Rating
.30
.89
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.05 (NS)
-.14
-.30
.56
.38
High School Percentile
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Achieved Characteristics